Memories of Nekojiru on Yoshiaki Yoshinaga

月刊漫画ガロ 山野一＆ねこぢる

Yoshiaki Yoshinaga on Nekojiru

May 10, 1998.

Nekojiru is dead.

Cause of death: Suicide.

Born: 1967. Height: 153 cm. Weight: 37 kg.

Plain looking. Short-cropped hair.

She was she first suicide I knew.

Coming as it did right after the suicide of hide, lead singer of X-JAPAN, also by hanging from a rope tied around a doorknob, some fans and press speculated about the possibility of it being a copycat suicide.

I wanted to get down on record a few things I knew about Nekojiru.

Nekojiru as I knew her: A close friend, gone forever.

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MEETINGS

I first met Nekojiru in 1990.

I was just starting out as an editor and a writer. Things were going great. I was full of spunk, fascinated by everything, exhilirated by my work.

A movie nerd approaching thirty, I was free of worries, dabbled in drugs, and felt totally open to life.

One of the magazines I read at the time was Garo.

If I ran across a manga I liked, I'd call the editors to get them to introduce me to the artist and get him to draw illustrations for my magazine.

Takashi Nemoto and Hajime Yamano were favorites from Garo. I knew both personally and commissioned work from them often.

At the time, Hajime Yamano drew manga about poor, stupid losers in a gritty, realistic millenial theater of desire.

His way of relentlessly exposing the insignificance and smallness of the human creature in his manga in a despaired, nonsensical tone won him the ire of sensible people and a cult following.

Self-styled renaissance man and misfit, reading a manga artist like Yamano was for me a healing activity.

"Exactly... That's exactly how it is..."

A common refrain when I read Yamano's manga.

Years after his manga had stopped appearing in Garo in the 90s, one day Garo published a piece signed "Yamano + Nekojiru Mama". It was Nekojiru's debut.

The title: Nekojiru Udon.

A father cat barges into an udon shop holding a kitten in his mouth, and asks the udon seller to neuter the kitten. The udon seller is taken aback at first but finally grabs a knife and stabs kitty. Kitty dies. A customer walks in and places an order: "One kitty udon." The Udon seller perks up: "Comin' right up!" The end.

Cute cats doing gruesome things.

The characters were drawn with a wobbly, hesitant line that gave it a curiously powerful impact you didn't get from better drawn work. I remember being slightly dazed for a while after reading the manga.

"Wow, Yamano-san has started up again."

Right away I knew I wanted him to draw a crazy cat manga for my magazine, so I gave him a call.

Our meeting took place the next day in a cafe. He had brought his wife, whom he introduced.

She was thin, short, boyish. The type of character you'd expect to see in a Moto Hagio manga.

"Actually, that cat manga was drawn by Chiyomi (Nekojiru's real name), though I'm helping out a lot. It's a joint effort."

Nekojiru seemed a bit shy that day. But she left a good impression on me.

"My wife is usually pretty blunt with most people. She'll say it right to your face if she doesn't like you. So I just hope the meeting goes well..."

Despite his fears, Nekojiru and I hit it off right away.

We got together relatively frequently after that, but I don't remember seeing her wearing a skirt during the whole time I knew her. She probably didn't own one.

Plain was the perfect word to describe her.

Following her debut, Nekojiru quickly established a strong base of support among a handful of people in the industry. One music writer I knew told me, "I interviewed her once, and it was love at first sight."

Nekojiru was like a fragile little animal in need of someone to protect her.

But behind this endearingly feminine side lurked a curious darkness. Something strange and dangerous had taken root in the depths of her soul. I was speechless when I realized the chasm of opaque desire that separated us.

TAKING UP ARMS

"I want a knife."

Nekojiru occasionally mumbled this under her breath.

Nekojiru was apparently gripped by a compulsion to arm herself with a weapon.

She would stand there in her army jacket with a completely serious look on her face and say: "I want a knife." What she wanted, really, was something to protect her from the world.

Once I got to know her, I felt I understood better how she could have come to the point of wanting to arm herself with a weapon.

To Nekojiru, the world around her was a dangerous place full of awful and repellant people and things. She couldn't let her guard down for a moment, so she escaped into her own world. When even that wasn't enough, she wanted a knife.

There were a few other special things about Nekojiru.

She was unrelenting in her criticism of others to the point of selfishness.

She could hardly eat anything. No fish, no meat. At restaurants, she would only order soup.

Once when she came to our house, my wife offered her an avocado.

"Try it. It's good."

Nekojiru seemed mystified by the strange fruit.

"Itadakimasu."

Nekojiru took a bite of the avocado.

"Pffff."

A moment later, pieces of avocado were flying across the room.

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Nekojiru was perfectly satisfied with food you could suck from a straw.

It's not that she was picky about food. She just didn't care about food.

In the end, she didn't care about living.

And, like my wife, she wasn't picky about gender in matters of love.

Nekojiru's first love was a young woman.

In her later years, she was on good terms with my wife.

We'd drop by her house often as newlyweds. It wasn't long until they were good friends.

We visited each other at home, and we talked on the phone.

You could sense that Nekojiru had only accepted my wife because of me. And to my wife, Nekojiru was like a family pet. She was constantly petting Nekojiru.

Seeing them glued to one another was prone to give rise to misunderstandings. They were like two young maidens in a film by Renoir - dazzling, beautiful, and erotic.

And now both of them are gone.

FLASH OF INTUITION

At one point I contracted Nekojiru to draw two pages of manga for a travel magazine I was editing.

I sensed it was best not to make too many demands, so I left it up to her to decide on the content. My sole request was for something in the vein of her debut; something with cats.

I was reassured by the knowledge that Yamano was in fact the co-creator and manager of the cat manga.

"After all this time I'm still amazed that she gave you the OK. Usually she never does." Yamano confided later.

Why Nekojiru gave me the OK, why she accepted me, I don't know. Usually she rejected anyone who approached her, and accepted only the people she had picked.

By some miracle, I was among the elect. Perhaps it was because we were both right-hemisphere types. Or perhaps because she sensed a kinship with me due to my childhood traumas.

I had some serious traumas regarding my relationship with my parents.

It was like Nekojiru's laser vision had bored right through my surface layers and into my soul.

That intuition impressed me. I was fortunate enough to bear witness to several other instances of her intuitive prowess as time went on, and came to look on her as something of a shaman.

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One day I got up close and personal with the shaman in Nekojiru.

It was back when I was living in an apartment the north side of Tokyo, drowning in hard drugs every day. One day Nekojiru informed me:

"You'll be dead at 35."

I went completely pale.

Why am I going to be dead at 35? A drug overdose? A hit and run? I don't want to die.

I couldn't stop thinking about her ominous prediction.

She had seen the shadow of death hovering over me.

But her premonition, it turns out, had in fact been directed at herself.

Why did Nekojiru, a shy and antisocial person, warm to someone like me?

I also enjoyed talking to Nekojiru.

Nekojiru had almost no friends, and she spent most of her time alone. Exceptionally, she was friends with an Israeli stallholder. She couldn't speak a work of English, but they got along well.

Nekojiru didn't have any salaryman friends, and she didn't seem to want any. She was strict about acquaintances, and hard to please. For some reason, an Israeli stallholder and a freelance writer were OK.

When I asked her what she thought of the manga-ka Takeshi Nemoto, she was respectful:

"He's a sempai who draws interesting manga."

Not so much a friend as an elder she respected. Nemoto himself had a good eye for judging people, and he had seen her potential since even before her debut.

After her debut, as before, Nekojiru was unconcerned by the business side of her work. She had no interest in worldly ambitions like making money and getting famous.

But a humble woman she was not. I knew nobody as unpredictable or as selfish as Nekojiru. She knew exactly what she wanted, and took it.

Garo didn't pay for manuscripts, so anyone who drew for them knew not to expect remuneration.

Having only drawn for the pages of Garo, Nekojiru later confided that she was grateful to me because I was the first person who had paid her for her work.

I had become something of a big brother to her.

Yamano was a father and a mother to Nekojiru. She addressed Yamano as mom, and she addressed me as big brother.

We were like a real family.

It was short-lived, but it was real.

TRIP

Nekojiru, Masaaki Aoyama and Saki Tatsumi. All three knew one another. All three are gone.

I eventually asked Nekojiru to draw manga for Abunai 1-go, a magazine Aoyama and I edited.

That's where Nekojiru got to know Aoyama, which is what led to him writing the afterword of her book Nekojiru Dango.

However, that had been arranged by the publisher. Nekojiru knew Aoyama through me, but they were never close.

In the early 90s, Nekojiru still wasn't too busy, and she was able to work at her own pace.

At the time I was in the habit of going over to Nekojiru's house and spending the night listening to techno/trance music. After discovering techno music, we often went out dancing at dingy clubs frequented by foreigners, or to Goa trance rave parties. We really loved the scene.

I'd go over to Yamano's house and the three of us would spend the night talking and tripping to the music.

This was before Saki and I got married. Nekojiru and Saki would drink, I would smoke weed, and we'd spend the night "music-tripping".

At the beginning I had to explain everything to them: "This is dub. It evolved from reggae. It's perfect with ganja." or "This is German Trance. It's all weepy sounding, with tinny synth."

Wrapped up in ourselves, we sat around all day doing nothing, just listening to music.

Sudden barks of vacant laughter, followed by endless reams of useless music trivia, and talk about our favorite artists, life and death.

Time flowing before our eyes , we were passengers on a ship of time bathed in a rain of music, riding into the light.

Seen from the outside, we must have looked like a bunch of degenerates.

Fearful but confident, at one with the universe, filled with ecstasy, we spent psychedelic days and nights dancing as if possessed. Worries about the future disappeared momentarily.

Nekojiru was open to just about anything at the beginning, but soon enough she got to know the music and developed preferences - "I like the faster stuff" or "I like the more screechy sounding stuff".

Finally, after listening to various things, she said her favorites were Aphex Twin and Hallucinogen, a Goa trance unit.

Hallucinogen is one of the best Goa trance units for tripping to LSD.

The only drug Nekojiru did while listening to music was Jack Daniels.

She couldn't stand the more melodic, emotional, weepy types of music.

The music of one of my favorite artists, Jam El Mar, seemed to please her at first, with its drugged-out sound and complex musical structures, but she later did a 180 and said she hated it because it sounded too "gay".

Near the end we usually wound up listening to whatever Nekojiru wanted.

Goa trance being dance music, I would often move my arms to the music, and I remember Nekojiru staring and looking very amused whenever I did.

Nekojiru never danced. She was the kind who sat still and went into herself.

I remember once, when we were listening to music, Nekojiru was in a particularly good mood and gave me a gift of a religious painting she had bought while on vacation in India, even though she

was fond of the picture. She could be generous that way. We used the painting for the back cover of issue 2 of "Abunai 1-go".

Nekojiru went on vacation to India in 1994. I had said I wanted to go with her, but I wasn't able to get time off, so she went alone with Yamano.

In Benares she saw holy men called Sado who would sit around all day smoking cannabis. "Why can't Japan be that laid back?" she asked me.

Nekojiru had never done drugs in Japan, but she tried cannabis in India and rather enjoyed its gentle intoxication.

PERSONAL LIFE

Unsurprisingly, the reason Nekojiru got together with Yamano was because of his work in Garo.

Nekojiru personally came knocking on his door and forced her way into his life.

She had just graduated from beauty college, so she was around 18 or 19.

Though practically a shut-in, Nekojiru had made up her mind that she wanted to help Yamano with his manga. The problem was, Nekojiru's drawings looked nothing like Yamano's. Yamano's manga was drawn in precise detail, but Nekojiru could only draw simple figures that looked amateurish, almost childish. But her drawings nevertheless had a mysterious appeal.

Yamano had sensed something special about her drawings, so on instinct he collaborated with her on a story, just to see what would happen. That was how Nekojiru's debut came about.

From that point on, every once in a while she drew new episodes in the Nekojiru Udon series, and I commissioned one-pagers and illustrations from her for my magazine.

This was in the early 90s, before she had to worry about deadlines.

The stories were about Nyatta and Nyako beating a dog for no reason, or seeing a homeless bum getting drunk on a bus, running to tell their dad, and the homeless bum puking on dad... I enjoyed them because they were true to Nekojiru's feelings.

The editors asked me to "make it more accessible," but I sensed that these cats had real potential to take off, so I let her do as she pleased.

Before becoming famous, Nekojiru lived an irregular lifestyle, staying awake for thirty hours at a time or sleeping all day. It must have wreaked havoc on her circadian rhythm.

Nekojiru had a cat. Her way of training her cat was a bit hard to stomach. When he did something he wasn't supposed to do, she lashed him with a whip. She sometimes used an amount of force with her cat that was clearly animal abuse. As a result, the cat didn't listen to Yamano or I, but never failed to follow Nekojiru's instructions.

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Nekojiru could be surprisingly persistent when she wanted something or someone.

Usually nobody interested her, but when someone did, she was unstoppable.

"I once forced a guy I liked to take my student notebook," Nekojiru told me.

Her first target was the lead singer of the funk band EP-4, Kaoru Sato. The second was Yamano. Later in her life she even fell for Aphex Twin.

Looks were important to Nekojiru. Richard D. James, AKA Aphex Twin, though not handsome perhaps, has a sort of boyish good looks. His music was very personal - beautiful at times, violent at others. His music made you wonder, "How much of this is planned out, and how much of it is pure instinct?" It was playful and free, not to say random.

Nekojiru fell for Aphex Twin through his music. Her feelings had become quite serious by the time the Richard D James Album came out. In accordance with her testament, they were joined forever in Nekojiru's casket.

Though Nekojiru could be aggressively go-getter with people she liked, most people interested her no more than food did. Her disinterest was impartial - pop stars mattered no more to her than did fans of her work. She was unpleasant to everyone equally; pure in her selfishness. She liked few things, and expressed her feelings concisely and emphatically: "I don't care." "I don't like it."

Despite a recommendation from Hyde of L'arc-en-Ciel on the cover of one of Nekojiru's books and widespread suspicions of her suicide being a copycat of X-Japan lead singer hide's suicide, the fact was, Nekojiru wasn't interested in pop stars like them. She could be just as much of an idol worshipper as anyone, but her idols weren't the popular kind. She had her own clear set of preferences that had nothing to do with popularity or musical quality.

"I love Jack Daniels nya~~!" read a line in her manga. Nekojiru loved to drink.

Once when we were at a restaurant, Nekojiru got drunk, and when the owner brought out a dish of grilled sweetfish on the house, Nekojiru became furious and made a big scene because "We didn't ask for it."

Otherwise, things rarely got out of hand when we got together to drink at Nekojiru's place in the early 90s.

But by 1997-98, at the peak of her popularity, Nekojiru had started to drink heavily.

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Nekojiru had one other defining trait.

She couldn't lie. It was physiologically impossible for her. That's why she said it loud and clear if she didn't like something.

Once we were eating with a friend at a sushi bar that we frequented because we often came up with interesting ideas there. As we sat quietly eating, suddenly Nekojiru blurted out, "This roe is disgusting. I bet it's fake!"

The noisy restaurant went dead silent. The cook stood rooted to the spot in front of us, knife hovering in the air in mid-chop. Taken aback and uncertain what to do, I froze up.

Once the initial shock had worn off, the cook was able to respond, "I can assure you it's real..."

To try to save the situation, I gave it a good laugh to try to pass it off as a joke.

Nekojiru was always honest - sometimes to the point of rudeness.

Once she called up the editor of a major magazine in the middle of the night to make the following request: "I want a different liaison."

"Why?" the editor asked.

"Because he's fat."

The editor couldn't believe his ears, so he asked again and again for the real reason, but she wouldn't give any other reason.

Without solid justification for doing something so drastic, the editor must have been quite put out. In the end, I think she got her request.

Nekojiru could be impulsive in an endearing way, but also self-centered. But she didn't do it to be mean. She didn't have anything against fat people. Her body seemed to experience a kind of sympathetic resonance and began to sweat uncontrollably whenever she was around them. She was unable to cope with the slightest stress that others could easily endure.

She was too sensitive.

I imagine the editors of the big publishing houses must have had their share of problems with her. Kid gloves must have been the order of the day.

Can't stand most people, gets depressed when she has to be around people she doesn't like... What a small-minded, unkind person she must have seemed from a distance.

Natural and ingenuous to the point of arrogance, Nekojiru was baptised the "Child Queen" by Yamano. The title fit her to a tee - pure and easily hurt, without the immune system to protect herself, yet haughty, turning her nose up at this and that.

After molding her environment in her own image, all that was left for her to do was to shut her eyes and turn inward.

I'M NOT AFRAID OF DEATH

Nekojiru had attempted to commit suicide in the past.

Like my wife Saki, Nekojiru was a proud woman with her own view of the world.

Saki was a left-hemisphere type: logical and thoughtful. Nekojiru was a right-hemisphere type: temperamental and turbulent. It was like she could see things other people couldn't. We may have gotten along because we were both right-hemisphere types with a schizophrenic streak.

Nekojiru's husband, Hajime Yamano, on the other hand, is level-headed, sensible, cool.

It comes as more of a surprise that someone like Yamano could have created the sort of deranged manga he has.

The creator of the more recent version of the manga, "Nekojiru y", is in fact none other than Yamano.

Yamano uses this name when he draws manga using Nekojiru's characters. Nekojiru y's manga may look like Nekojiru's manga on the surface, but underneath it's a world apart.

Nekojiru often got depressed and spent her time holed up in her room playing Final Fantasy.

I don't play video games, but I once played a fighting game with Nekojiru and she tore me to shreds. She laughed when she saw me getting irritated because I couldn't figure out the controls: "You're getting all mad!"

What caused Nekojiru to become closed in on herself?

I've given the question a lot of thought, and the best answer I can come up with is that it must have happened when she was living with her family. By the time I met her she was already completely shut off from the outside world.

Nekojiru was seeing a psychiatrist. She had been diagnosed as manic-depressive.

I remember her saying on several occasions, "I'm not afraid of death."

Near the end of the publishing bubble, between 1992 and 1994, sales were still pretty good. I had it easy, putting together books for fun, getting royalties on the sales, and then in turn using the royalties to have more fun.

Nekojiru was still free to work at her own pace, so there was a relaxed atmosphere about her work.

We got together more often to have fun than we did to discuss work. She never seemed depressed when she was with me, but she may have just been hiding it.

Things were going well and everybody was still alive, so it was a relatively happy time for us.

Listening to our favorite music, having a bit of fun with drugs every once in a while, chatting about everything and nothing... time flew by.

Around this time, dreams of making it big may even have taken root in Nekojiru.

Buoyed on the waves of the publishing bubble, Aoyama had his own small but intensely devoted following, and in a sense was the most successful of us all.

But there would come a time when Nekojiru would sell more books than even she could ever have imagined.

And that was the beginning of the end for Nekojiru.

NEKOJIRU FEVER

Suddenly in the mid-90s, Nekojiru's popularity took off.

The nation was swept by Nekojiru fever. The epithet abunakawaii was coined to describe the special appeal of her work: Cute + dangerous.

The simple forms of the characters must have been a big factor in the sudden popularity. I also believe that to a large extent her work was accepted only because of its naive, childish drawing style.

Abunakawaii. The perfect word to describe Nekojiru's manga.

It's particularly apt for the early works, with their innocent cruelty. Nekojiru herself even fit the bill, with her unfeigned innocence.

From one moment to the next, Nekojiru was a star. Gone were the days when we could spend all night chatting and listening to music.

Saki and I had married by that time, and Nekojiru and Yamano were so busy they didn't even have time to sleep.

With the sudden popularity came the need to produce her manga in large quantities, and that was something that was not in Nekojiru's character.

It now became a battle with deadline after deadline, and eventually she became overworked.

Work came no longer just from Garo but from Tokyo Electric Co. and everywhere inbetween. Asking someone to mass-produce what were essentially personal whimsies thrown off for fun was misguided and inherently impossible, but she managed to do it anyway. No doubt this was partly Nekojiru's attempt to ingratiate herself with the big magazines.

Neither Nekojiru nor Yamano could turn down work. They accepted everything that came. After years of scraping by, the logic of poverty had led them to the conclusion that it was wrong to turn down work. I remember thinking they should be a little more selective about the offers they accepted.

COLLABORATION

When we speak of the manga artist "Nekojiru", in fact we're referring to two people: Nekojiru herself, of course, but also her husband and collaborator, Hajime Yamano. You could summarize the situation by saying that the ideas of the right-brained Nekojiru were arranged in dramatic form by the left-brained Yamano.

For the most part, the stories are based on dreams or things actually seen by Nekojiru. When things seem a little too strange for reality, it's probably because they're based on one of her dreams.

The line between reality and dreams seemed blurred in Nekojiru's mind. This special way of seeing things is behind the unique version of the world in her stories.

The encounters with strange people in her stories were a mix of reality and fiction. Yamano surely helped to mold Nekojiru's ideas into concrete form, but the division of labor is not at all clear. Their collaboration consisted of the delicate tightrope act of translating the fragile madness of Nekojiru's ideas into a concrete form that anybody could understand. Like siamese twins, there's no way of saying where Nekojiru ends and Yamano begins. In every story by Nekojiru there's always more or less Yamano mixed in.

But some stories do seem more purely Nekojiru. I think it's fair to say that her unpaid early work for Garo or for me - the work collected in books like Nekojiru Udon and Jirujiru Nikki - is high proof Nekojiru. Here it's obvious she was coming up with the stories quite freely.

On the other hand, you can sense that Yamano must have done the great burden of the work in the stories that they started having to churn out in large quantities only a short time later. With new publishers came new restrictions, and the stories had to meet those restrictions. It gets particularly striking with serials like Neko no Kamisama, where it's clear how far they've had to go to accomodate the major publishers. The more they had to do so, the more effort Yamano had to make, so the more his style came to the fore.

Stories like Invisible, written by Yamano based on the dream notes left behind by Nekojiru after her suicide, are clearly more Yamano than Nekojiru. Though identical on the surface, Nekojiru and Nekojiru y are not the same. It's as if, shorn of his siamese twin after the death of Nekojiru, Yamano had continued to publish under the name of the half-entity Nekojiru y.

NATURAL ACID

Reading the collection of early works that is Nekojiru Udon could very easily become a traumatic experience for a delicate soul.

Two cat siblings go around randomly killing whatever rubs them the wrong way. Whatever they dislike, they kill. The cuteness of the cats lures us into accepting their casual cruelty. It's an outlook that seems to bespeak at the very least an ounce of self-hatred, if not outright hatred of the entire human race.

Whenever Nekojiru was talked about in the press, she was usually described in terms something like these: "A mangaka with a cult following for her manga featuring cute cat characters commiting casual acts of cruelty." Casual acts of cruelty. If you think about it, it begins to seem like a despaired expression of resignation in the face of death; as if she were saying to people, "We're all going to die anyway."

Suddenly the public goes crazy for Nekojiru's work because it's abunakawaii. Short of reducing her work to such a simplistic formula, how else could hundreds of thousands of people suddenly have wanted to associate themselves with a story with such a dangerous message? Rather than relating to Nekojiru's message of "We all die", clearly most people were simply reacting to the powerful aura emitted by her simply drawn characters. In the end that was the element that gained her a broad readership.

All of Nekojiru's early work has a the same uniquely "trippy" feeling. You could almost call it psychotic. I liked to refer to these early works as "Natural acid".

In a sense it feels like Nekojiru used her stories to play family. I don't know anything about her family, but she didn't give the impression of being a family person. It seems probable that the family in her stories wasn't based on her own family, but was a sort of ideal family that Nekojiru wished she could have had.

In all probability, the character Nyako was her, and the character Nyasuo was Yamano. Nekojiru did have a real younger brother, but it seems unlikely that Nyatta was based on him.

Nekojiru Kenbunroku (Nekojiru Travelogue), included in Nekojiru Shokudo (Nekojiru Diner), has Nekojiru travelling to various places and giving her impressions. In typical Nekojiru fashion, wherever she goes, she says it sucks. But the editors really do only send her to places that suck. It's like they're doing it deliberately to get her to say bad things.

Did they really think Nekojiru would enjoy going to a popular theme park?

Jirujiru Ryokoki - Indo Hen (Jirujiru Travelogue - India) more effectively channels Nekojiru's unique viewpoint onto a real situation, and is perhaps her most accessible book. It's a book I'm very fond of because it bursts with the romance of travel. She also drew an account of her experience of tasting banglassi (yogurt with cannabis) while in India.

The real Nekojiru comes through in her late book Jirujiru Nikki (Jirujiru Diary).

Many of the pages depict things supposedly seen by Nekojiru in her daily life, such as a woman shitting in the middle of the road. Sometimes you have to wonder if she really saw all of those things.

Perhaps they were things only Nekojiru could see.

THE LIQUID ROOM

On February 1, 1997, Nekojiru and I went to see Aphex Twin live in concert.

My memory of the event is as clear as if it had happened yesterday.

It was at the Liquid Room in Kabukicho, Shinjuku. The room was packed to the brim. There wasn't even room to move.

DJ Cylob was the opening band. I asked Nekojiru what she thought of the music.

"It sucks. Hurry up and get off the stage."

Unusually for the club, about a third of the audience was sitting on the ground. Nekojiru pushed and shoved her way to the front of the stage to be near the DJ booth. Little old Nekojiru was practically tackling these big guys, pushing them out of her way. Though small and frail, she could muster tremendous power when driven.

Finally Cylob left the DJ booth. Two songs from Mike (µ-sik) & Ritchie's album started playing on the speakers. Richard was on.

It's hard to say whether Aphex Twin's music is for dancing or for listening. The dance floor was split about evently between people dancing and sitting. There may even have been more sitting. Nekojiru was moving her body to the rhythm in the first row. Her eyes never left the DJ booth for a moment.

Richard, on the other hand, stood hunched over the turntable the whole time. His long hair fell down and covered his face during the entire performance. Fuck the audience, he seemed to be saying.

Two teddy bears were duking it out behind Richard throughout the show, a photo of Richard's face taped over their faces.

After about an hour Richard abruptly left the stage. Nekojiru immediately left her spot and walked over to where Yamano and I were sitting near the back of the room.

"I've had enough. Let's go."

The party was supposed to go all night, but Nekojiru wasn't interested in the other DJs.

"How was Richard?" I asked.

"I couldn't see his face the whole time, but it was nice. I liked the teddy bears."

Nekojiru was always like that - short sentences, to the point. She could sound curt if you didn't know her, but she was actually the emotional type. Coming from her, a comment like that meant something like, "OMG, it was so fucking amazing I almost wet myself!"

In other words, she had fun.

INFERNO

During the last few years of her life, Nekojiru's workload had increased to the point that she was really and truly overworked.

By this time it was no longer about drawing for fun; it was about making the deadline no matter what.

In books like Jirujiru Nikki and Neko Kamisama, Nekojiru often simply transcribed stories she'd heard from other people.

"I deleted a whole book's worth of data from my PC," I lamented to Nekojiru once. Later the story turned up, word for word, in Nekojiru's manga.

I once sent a part-timer to go on a company outing in my place because I was too busy, and as an omiyage he brought me a plastic pouch of dried seaweed - the regular kind you can find at corner stores everywhere, to sprinkle on breakfast, with five individually wrapped portions inside(!). That story also found its way into her manga, word for word.

Overworked, Nekojiru had run out of ideas. But she had deadlines to meet, and did the best she could manage. She had a strong sense of responsibility, and always found a way to come through in the end. More than once she found herself cornered by several deadlines and had to push herself to the brink of collapse to finish everything.

Once I was at my office late at night and I heard a knock on the door.

"Can I sleep here tonight?" an emaciated and exhausted-looking Yamano inquired.

"What happened?"

"Well..."

Yamano hesitated. Apparently Nekojiru had attacked him with a boxcutter in a fit of rage.

I had Yamano lie down on the couch and brought him a glass of water.

It was hard to break the awkward silence.

The phone rang. I picked it up. It was Nekojiru.

"I knew he'd be over there. Put Yasuo on the phone!" Yasuo was Yamano's real name.

"I can't. He's sleeping right now."

I tried to calm her down, but nothing worked. "Put Yasuo on the phone right now! He ran out on me, so go wake him up and put him on the phone!" She was furious. Her nerves were completely shot.

Things like this happened all the time when the work got overwhelming near deadlines. Two people working as closely as they did were bound to break under the tension sooner or later. Usually it started with Nekojiru having a fit of rage (or more accurately, physically attacking Yamano).

As I looked at Yamano splayed out on the couch, visions of Nekojiru "training" her cat, Nyansuke, danced before my eyes.

I refused to let Yamano go home out of fear for his safety.

Before long, dawn broke. The sparrows began singing and the newspaper delivery truck passed by outside.

Nekojiru must have calmed down by now.

Yamano finally went back home to Nekojiru. "Nekojiru needs me," he said as he left.

Looking back on it now, the root of all their problems was the poverty that convinced them that they had to accept every commission once their books began selling.

If they had been in a position to choose their work, Nekojiru might not have died so soon.

*

"You guys need to take a break."

One day in 1998, at a time when Nekojiru and Yamano were in the midst of their hardest periods, my wife Saki and I paid a visit to the Nekojiru residence.

It was about three weeks before Nekojiru's suicide.

We sat together relaxing, listening to music. Nekojiru had a pair of speakers especially made for techno music, in the shape of a dodecahedron with speakers on each face. The high-hat came through particularly clearly on these speakers.

Nekojiru said little and sat still, completely focused on the grating sound of the high-pitched techno. Yamano, exhausted from the long days and nights of work, seemed pained by the harsh sounds.

Concerned, I suggested, "Let's listen to this," and put on some ambient dub. Yamano seemed releived, but Nekojiru, who preferred faster, more aggressive music, seemed displeased by the more mellow music and sulked in her corner.

Already on edge from lack of sleep, the psychedelic trance only seemed to serve to put her more on edge.

Nekojiru seemed to be in an unusually bad mood that day.

Suddenly I became uneasy when I remembered how she was prone to saying, "I'm not afraid of death."

As we left that day, Yamano and Nekojiru watched us for a good while from the porch. I can still remember the pleading, spent expression on Yamano's face.

"Don't go! Stay a bit longer! Don't leave us alone!" his eyes seem to beg.

After we left, I suppose they went back to work.

But they were already at the end of the line.

PEACE IN DEATH

"Chiyomi is dead. She committed suicide. You were one of her few friends, so I wanted to tell you right away."

I learned of Nekojiru's death by a phone call from Yamano.

They discovered her late, and rigor mortis had already set in. I learned of her death only a few hours after she was discovered.

When we received the call, my wife and I were in Shinjuku and thinking of going to the Imax. Yamano's call was a shock.

Yamano did his best to remain calm.

In the back of our minds we all had the vague notion that this might happen one day, but we never imagined she would actually go through with it.

The movie was put on hold and we ran to Yamano.

At that moment I was more worried about Yamano than about Nekojiru. I couldn't imagine the shock of losing one's wife to death. At the time I thought the most important thing - more important than mourning Nekojiru's death - was taking care of the person left behind.

Nekojiru's expression was calm. There was no trace of suffering on her face. No trace of regrets, of clinging to life. She seemed completely at peace.

It made sense to me, but it was also slightly terrifying.

A CD and a video of Aphex Twin were placed in her casket.

Aphex Twin's Ambient Works II was played at her funeral.

Nekojiru had written to do so in her will.

Having attempted to commit suicide in the past, Nekojiru had written wills on a number of occasions. Her last extant will in fact dated from several years prior.

However, at Yamano's discretion, not everything was done according to her will.

Nekojiru didn't want a gravestone. Yamano thought her family would want a gravestone so that they could visit her grave, so he had one made. But as if in a last act of defiance, the gravestone remains nameless. A single Sanskrit character decorates Nekojiru's gravestone.

Yamano told me once what it meant, but I've forgotten.

One line in Nekojiru's will reads: "No discussion of possible motives."

Yamano has for the most part refused all interviews.

At the time, the sight of Yamano was so painful to me that I almost couldn't bear to look at him.

5 years later. To think that now I stand in his position...

THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO DIE AND THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO LIVE

Suicide hurts the people left behind.

Nothing can describe the pain, or erase it.

Yamano only managed to endure it.

As the "Nekojiru" unit became popular, they became increasingly busy, until they became as inseparable as siamese twins. Nothing could separate them. To separate them you would have had to rip them apart. To do so would be to discard them, and you don't just easily discard a human being.

For a couple in a relationship as close as Yamano and Nekojiru, the pain of losing that other half must have been unbearable.

After Nekojiru's death, the abandoned half of the unit continued to release work in the Nekojiru series under the pseudonym of "Nekojiru y". Nekojiru and Nekojiru y look identical on the surface, but deep down they're completely different. Not in the sense that the former was hand-drawn and analog where the latter is digitally drawn; but in philosophy. Nekojiru chose to die, and her work clearly reflects her longing for death.

Yamano chose to live. That difference is immense, and reflected in their work. Yamano's work is completely lacking in the dangerous, trancelike mood of Nekojiru's work.

Many readers may have discovered the world of Nekojiru through Yamano's work done following the death of his siamese twin, but those who read Nekojiru from the beginning may feel something is lacking in the new work. The longing for death is completely absent in the new work. It's what I suppose you would call "healthy".

Yamano has become healthy again. That's why he no longer draws the sort of vicious manga he used to draw. He's grown beyond negativity.

When my wife committed suicide six years later in the fall of 2003, I found a pillar of support in another person who had lost his wife to suicide: Yamano. He understood my feelings of instability at the time. As I was teetering on the edge of mental exhaustion, he pushed me in the right direction.

Yamano had managed to overcome. That was a great comfort.

KILL OR DIE

Nekojiru's suicide made big headlines.

Almost certainly in no small part because it came so soon after the death of hide of X-Japan, Nekojiru's suicide was also given superstar treatment.

On May 28, 1998, the Shukan Shincho weekly wrote:

"There has been idle speculation that her suicide might be a copycat of hide. However, as far as I know she wasn't a fan of hide. Besides, she wasn't the type to copy other people."

The person the manga magazine editor was referring to in this quote was the mangaka Nekojiru. His point: The only similarity was that both seemed to have a bright future ahead of them.

Nekojiru began drawing manga after marrying the mangaka Hajime Yamano. She quickly gained a reputation for her style of manga that succesfully breached the gap between cute kittens and cruelty. After handling a television ad for Tokyo Electric, she looked to be on her way up.

The editor continues, "As anyone will realize if just they read her manga, beneath the surface cuteness was a self-destructive, pessimistic attitude towards life and death. In recent work she dismissed the earth as bound for annihilation, and laughed about how she almost went out of her mind after eating a magic mushroom in Bali. She was clearly teetering on the brink."

If only we could all be as uninhibited as Nekojiru's cats...

What could have made Nekojiru want to die?

Overwork was certainly a factor. Dealing with the big publishers must also have been a source of stress. Then there's her predisposition for depression.

But it's impossible to disregard the obvious signs in her work: The recurring theme of death's inevitability; the obvious disregard for life.

Nekojiru was the purest person I knew. My wife called her "authentic". Pure, authentic, natural acid, psychotic, shamanic. Words that spring to mind when I think of Nekojiru. It must have been impossible for someone of her purity and innocence to live in this world.

In the eight short year that I knew her, Nekojiru didn't change the slightest bit in terms of appearance or behavior. Most women would grow from childhood into adulthood, but it was like Nekojiru refused to grow old.

They say sales of Nekojiru character goods exploded after her suicide. Dying made her a hit. Nekojiru probably wouldn't have cared one way or another.

In any case, the living can never know what motivated the dead to take their lives.

I'm surprised she even made it to the age of 31. If she lived as long as she did, it must have been because of Yamano.

In the end, she wanted to die, so she died. That's all we can say for sure.

No attachments to life: Endearing though this trait of Nekojiru's might have been in one sense, it was terrifying in another. I'm the kind of person who wants to live as long and as enjoyable a life as possible, so I've always been somewhat scared of people who aren't afraid of death. But Nekojiru had lived long enough. Apparently she no longer needed this world.

She wrung herself dry in a furious fit of work over the span of a few years, and went out in a puff of smoke. It's so elegant it's almost scary.

Perhaps she was trying to tell the world about herself in her books all this time.

Kill or die: Given only one choice, the answer was obvious.

MEMORIES OF A RAVE

I'll never forget this memory of Nekojiru.

At a rave once I collapsed due to a combination of exhaustion and drug overdose. I needed an ambulance.

Seeing that I could barely stand, Nekojiru called the ambulance, made sure I got on safely, and waited worriedly for me until I came back from the hospital.

Other friends who had accompanied me to the rave, including Masaki Aoyama and Osamu Tsurumi, had disappeared by then, presumably fearing possible arrest.

Nekojiru wasn't afraid of dying, but she was afraid of a friend dying. She was selfish but caring.

Together we left the rave and joined Yamano at an onsen.

As I returned to my senses lying on the floor of a private room in the onsen, I was thankful to be alive, but also incredibly lonely. Tears began rolling down my cheeks. It's embarrassing to admit, but I couldn't stop crying.

"Why are you crying?" Nekojiru came to my side and asked with a worried expression. She stayed by my side for a while.

Perhaps she thought I might commit suicide if she didn't stay by my side.

"Are you all right?"

I had my arms over my face so I couldn't answer.

How could you have done something like that to yourself when you could be so caring about others?

I ask Nekojiru and I ask my wife.

How could you leave behind the people you cared for?

Part of me doesn't want to accept the selfishness of their act.

Nekojiru suddenly found her books selling. She probably didn't want to, but she had to accept all of the commissions that came her way. She worked hard and probably made a lot of money. But

she didn't care about the money. She cared just as little about life. She predicted I would die at 35. Perhaps that's why she liked me - because she sensed in me another soul on the verge of death.

But I just act crazy. I don't want to die.

Translated from Jisatsu Sarechatta Boku 自殺されちゃった僕 by Yoshinaga Yoshiaki 吉永嘉明 (11/25/2004, Asuka Shinsha), a book describing in simple, direct words three of the author's acquaintances who commited suicide within the last seven years: Nekojiru, Masaaki Aoyama, and his wife.